

Growing Your Business via the Internet: *How to effectively design your website for e-commerce*

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Abstract:

Amidst the hype about the Internet, there is a need for a reality check before deciding to enter the race to build a WebSite for your company. The Internet can open up new opportunities for business operation, with potentially the whole global marketplace at your fingertips, but there are some traps that should be avoided. Issues to consider include good WebSite design, simple marketing tips for the Net, and the challenges of e-commerce.

At this conference we have been bombarded with the hype to get into E-commerce and connect to the Internet. Amidst the hype about the Internet, however, there is a need for a reality check before deciding to enter the race to build a WebSite for your company.

This paper attempts to be a little more practical in its approach rather than theoretical. It is aimed at those who are currently considering establishing a WebSite, or who are working within regions and shires where small business people are actively seeking to establish an Internet presence for e-commerce applications. The intention is to define the scope of a WebSite and give you valid reasons for being on line. In particular this papers aims to help you avoid the "me too syndrome". The issues will not be considered in depth, but will include good WebSite design, simple marketing tips for the Net, and the challenges faced when using the Internet for e-commerce.

It is proposed that you should consider why, who and how you will go about the process of establishing a WebSite for your company. That is:

- 1 Why are you establishing a WebSite?
 - Have you sound market reasons?

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- Have you checked out the local Net demographics first?
 - Do the Net demographics match your market niche?
- 2 Who:
- will store it on the Internet for you?
 - will design it for you?
 - is going to keep it updated?
- 3 How:
- will you test it's working for you?
 - will potential customers find your WebSite?

It is not intended that this paper will answer all your questions, but it will briefly address each of these points. Other papers at this conference may address Internet Demographics and Internet e-commerce legal challenges in more depth.

Why are you establishing a WebSite?

Too many people are jumping on the Internet bandwagon without thinking whether or not this is what is required for their small business.

Have you sound market reasons?

If you can remember, there was an interesting IBM advertisement that was on the television over the last year or two. One person sits with a computer laptop and the other person sits on the other side of the table reading a newspaper. The newspaper reader states "It says here we have to be on the Internet!" The laptop expert looks puzzled and asks, "Why?" The newspaper reader looks again at his newspaper and frowningly states, "It doesn't say!"

So why do you want to establish a WebSite? Have you accepted what you have heard but have not really considered "Why?" To be frank, have you some sound market reasons for doing so? If you haven't thought about this aspect, then you should. When you market in the traditional sense, you consider first your market demographics and then you aim your marketing to meet those demographics. You plan in the traditional market cycle to include: prospecting, advertising, promotion, sales, fulfillment, support, and follow-up for your clients. ***The Net is the same!***

A WebSite is part of your overall marketing strategy, and is not your only marketing strategy. As an integral part of your marketing, it should be planned just as carefully and with the same sound marketing reasons. So let's consider the Internet Demographics briefly and you decide whether or not these demographics meet your market niche.

Have you checked the Internet Demographics?

Firstly let's consider the latest world Internet Demographics. Statistically the phenomenal growth rate of the Internet continues. A number of Internet sites provide valuable insights into this growth rate. Sites to explore here include:

- World Internet Connections Feb. 2000 <http://www.mids.org/>
- NUA Internet Surveys <http://www.nua.ie/surveys/index.cgi>

As an 'educated guess' the following statistics (Fig. 1) show how many people are online worldwide as of February 2000. With 275 Million people connected this is less than three percent (3%) of the world's population who currently access the Internet (given the world's total population was estimated to reach 6 Billion in 1999¹).

Figure 1: World Internet Population²

World Region	Est. Number on Internet Feb. '00	Est. Number on Internet Aug. '99	Growth Rate Aug. 99 - Feb 00
World Total	275 million	195 million	41%
Africa	2.46 million	1.72 million	43%
Asia/Pacific	54.9 million	33.61 million	63%
Europe	71.99 million	46.39 million	55%
Canada & USA	136 million	107.3 million	28%
Latin America	8.79 million	5.29 million	66%
Middle East	1.29 million	0.88 million	46%

While three percent of the world's population sounds small, we should also consider that for the last 10 years the size of the Internet in Host Domain connections has doubled approximately every 12 months. Figure 1 also shows the approximate growth rate over the past 6 months, while Figure 2 shows the growth rates in Domain connections over the past 5 and a half years. It can clearly be seen, by following the two columns of data in Fig. 2, that the Internet Domain growth has maintained a steady doubling in size over the 5 years prior to 1999. While the Internet Domain growth rate has remained fairly constant, to date, during 1999 the first signs in the slowing of this growth rate appeared. The growth rate is beginning to slow as it is influenced by the heavy domination of USA and Canada on the Internet to date.

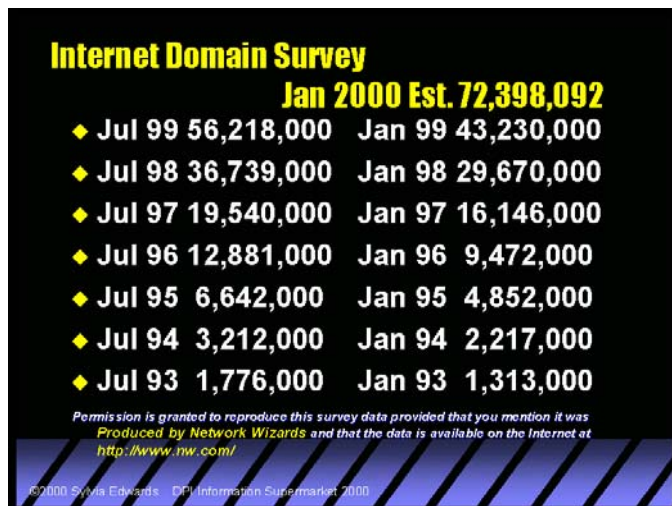


Figure 2: Internet Domain Survey Jan. 1999³

¹ United Nations Population Division: World's Total Population <http://www.popin.org/pop1998/1.htm>

² Source: NUA Internet Surveys <http://www.nua.ie/surveys/index.cgi>

³ Network Wizards <http://www.nw.com/>

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In Australian terms, the Asia/Pacific growth rate has also slowed, but not to the same extent as in USA and Canada (Fig. 1). Despite the slowing down, it is still obvious that there is a continued strong potential growth rate for the Internet.

Do the Net Demographics match your market niche?

In world terms, the average users of the Internet over the past year have been 40% Female, 60% Male, well educated, and well off. In the last couple of years there has been a general increase in the proportion of female users (38.7%), a slightly lower level of educational attainment (50.1% college +), and a diversification away from the computer and education fields for the occupations of Net users. New WWW users are mostly female (51.7%) and more likely to be under 20 or over 50 years old than in their middle years.⁴

The Australian perspective can be best found in the Australian Bureau of Statistics data, including the ABS report titled *Use of the Internet by Householders, Feb. 1999. 8147.0*. This report gives a fairly comprehensive collection of data about the average Internet user in Australia, their Internet use characteristics, and includes e-commerce activities to date.

As at February 1999 it was estimated that just over 18% of all households (1.3 million) had some Internet access, an increase of 423,000 or 50% over the February 1998 estimate. An estimated 5 million [Australian] adults accessed the Internet at some time over the 12 months to February 1999 which was 37% of Australia's total population. In comparison, just over 3 million adults accessed the Internet at some time over the 12 months to February 1998 which was 23% of Australia's adult population. (Source: ABS Use of the Internet by householders, Feb. 1999. [8147.0] p. 3)

This publication estimates that in the 12 months prior to Feb. 1999
nearly 4% of Australian adults (480,000) used the Internet to purchase or order goods or services for their own private use. ... These Internet shoppers made an estimated 1.9 million purchases via the Internet and nearly 77% of Internet shoppers paid for their purchases online. (Ibid, p. 7)

This certainly proves that there is genuine interest in purchasing via the Internet in Australia. However, it is highly recommended that you first consider where your market niche is, who your potential customers/clients are, and then consider whether or not these people are likely to be accessing the Internet at present. There are some valid reasons to consider that these people may be online in the future, but your present rush to proceed may not be warranted without sound market analysis first. You need to consider whether it is worthwhile being on the Internet at present, and whether the average Internet user fits your market niche profile.

Having decided why you want to proceed, you have then a series of further decisions to be made.

⁴ GVU's Tenth WWW User Survey (Conducted December 1998) http://www.gvu.gatech.edu/user_surveys/
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http://www.gvu.gatech.edu/user_surveys/survey-1998-10/graphs/#general

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Who will develop, store and maintain the WebSite?

You have now to make the "Who" decisions for your WebSite. These next considerations include, who will store your WebSite? who will design it for you? and who will keep it maintained for you?

Who will store it for you? Check out the ISP!

There is a variety of ISP's (Internet service Providers), and in order to choose the ISP for your company you should consider the following aspects:

- The ISP's age and experience.
- Is the ISP well financed?
- Does the ISP's equipment keep pace with the latest technology? Do they use old outdated 14.4 modem banks, or are they sending out data using the latest speed modems, or ISDN. Also, what is their policy to keep these items updated?
- Do they have good references? That is, talk to their clients!
- You should test their Dial-up for reliability; after all, busy signals are not good for your business!
- Does the ISP have technical support for you when things go wrong?
- What happens if the service gets poor? Are you still locked into their contract?

Again the traditional marketing principles help you here. With sound past experience, you would not enter into a contract for advertising without doing all these things, and again the Net is the same. The challenge is simply the different terminology, but the principle remains unchanged. Check out your ISP options, decide what support they will offer you in the process, and determine how reliable they may be as a sub-contractor for your company.

Who will design the WebSite?

Having now chosen your ISP, the next issue is the design of the WebSite. You have a few options here:

- you could pay someone to produce it for you,
- arrange to get it designed in-house by your own IT expert,
- you may be able to arrange for your ISP to produce the WebSite for you, or
- you could attend a course, learning how to create a WebPage, and then produce it yourself!

Any of these options is acceptable, and your decision will depend on your own experience and the time you have available for the options being considered. Just remember a few simple pointers. Whichever option you choose, do NOT decide to spend thousands of dollars in order to set-up your WebSite or a WebServer. Also, do not automatically assume that a "Techie" type of IT expert is the person to design your WebSite. The "*Web mad*" new Information Technology recruit is not the person to design the marketing strategy for you.

In simple terms, what the Internet offers you, for possibly the first time, is a level playing field. It no longer matters what budget someone has for advertising or marketing. Once

you are on the Internet few people could tell what money has been spent to design the site, and many simple ideas work just as well as the expensive ones.



History repeats itself. What has previously worked in marketing will probably work again. The marketing challenge is the same, despite the new medium of the Internet, so use your marketer's expertise and already proven strategies. Get your Marketer to work together with your web-mad expert.

To quote from a talk by someone from The Qld. Information Industries Board, the *"average Internet Surfer is a little Lost Puppy Dog"*

If a little lost puppy dog comes into your yard, you do not throw the newspaper at them, instead you get down to their level and you encourage them with smiles, and interesting treats, to come to you. You are hoping that, one day, that little dog will trust you enough to come and eat out of your hand. Marketing on the Internet can be considered in the same manner. What you want to do is make the site interesting, to encourage them to come and look at your site frequently, and eventually "to come and eat out of your hand" - or - to purchase from your WebSite online. The WebSite needs to be designed with sound marketing principles guiding the layout of the WebSite. It needs to be updated regularly and made as interesting as possible for the potential customer, to encourage them to return to "your yard" and hopefully eat out of your hand.

Who is going to update the WebSite? Who will maintain the site for you?

This raises the important consideration of who will maintain the WebSite once it has been established. This should be part of the design process. Assuming you have decided you do not have the skills to design the site yourself, then part of your contract for the WebSite design should include a provision to have the site regularly maintained. That is, checking that all hypertext links still work on the entire site, loading new items of interest to your potential clients, and so forth. A WebSite that is not maintained and full of dead hypertext links is not good advertising for your company or its products, and will not encourage repeat visits.

What are the WebPage Design Basics?

After the work behind the scenes on the "Who?" process, there are other requirements which should be considered. In simple terms it can be called: WebSite design basics.

The primary design basic is that not everyone sees it the same when your WebSite is viewed on the Internet. There are different browsers that display your WebSite to the world and these browsers are simply software to display a WebPage. Some people may even use text-based browsers, but most use graphical browsers. Whichever way your site is viewed, you must ensure you have designed the site to view correctly in these different browsers. There are also many different versions of graphical browsers.

The primary graphical browsers used at present are Netscape Composer and Microsoft's Internet Explorer (IE). It is possible to get a variety of current statistics on how many

people are using each type of the above two main browsers. Suffice it to say, whichever browser is the current market leader, the other browser is not far behind. What is often not considered however, are the differences between the ways in which the different browsers actually display your WebPage to the end user. There are differences in overall layout, and differences in colours; and that's just the thin edge of the wedge. There is also the problem that some people are using older versions of Netscape or IE, or other browsers that may or may not support JavaScript, Frames, nor any of the other useful tools for making a WebPage come "alive".

The following html file will now be used for a simple demonstration. This is the sample HTML file used for the WebPage displayed in Figures 3 and 4 below.

```
<HTML>
<HEAD>
<TITLE>segra</TITLE>
</HEAD>
<BODY>
<table border=1>
<tr>
<td>
<H2>Here is a simple WebPage to Demonstrate the differences between <B><I>NetScape Communicator
4.5
</I></B> and <B><I>MS Internet Explorer 4.0</I></B> (IE)</h2>
</td>
<td>
<IMG align=right SRC="Pencil.jpg"HEIGHT=290 WIDTH=260>
<h2>This table displays better in <B><I>Netscape</I></B> than it does in <B><I>IE</I></B>.</h2>
</td>
</tr>
</table>
</BODY>
</HTML>
```

Figure 3 and 4: Differences displayed by Netscape 4.05 and IE 3.0 for one WebPage

Fig. 3 Netscape Communicator 4.5

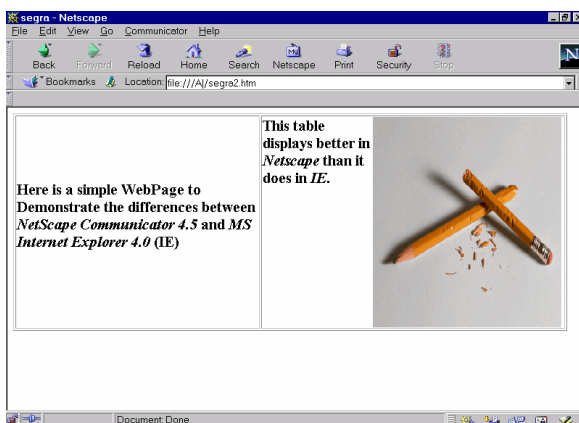
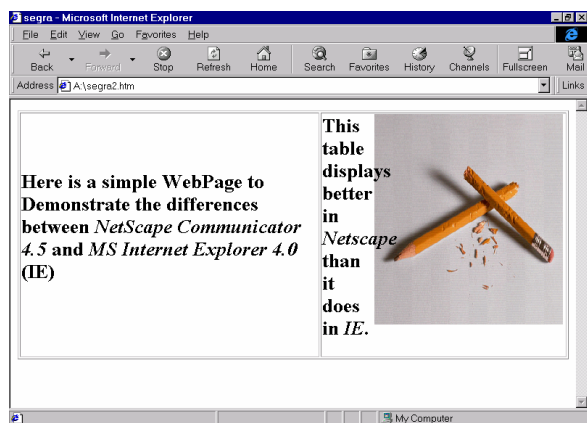


Fig. 4: MS Internet Explorer 4.0



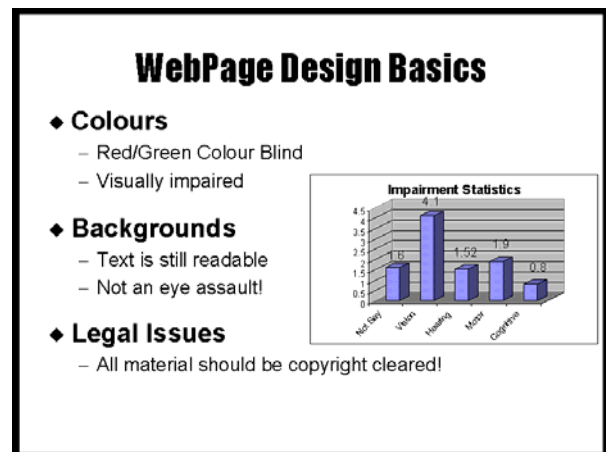
Without time to delve into the differences displayed between browsers, Figure 3 and 4 show the same basic HTML file (WebPage) displayed by the two main browsers Netscape Communicator 4.5 and MS Internet Explorer 4.0 (IE). You should note that the same file displays differently in each of the two browsers. In IE the text overlaps the

picture. In Netscape, the table aligns slightly differently which gives room so that the text does not overlap the picture.

Obviously when you design your page, these sorts of things can be avoided if you check them out in different browsers. However, who in business has the time to check the many different browser versions of their WebPages? The best solution is to check your WebSite for errors across different browsers by using either the *Web Site Garage* (<http://www.websitegarage.com>) or the *NetMechanic* (<http://www.netmechanic.com/>). Both of these sites also provide you with some basic information on how well your WebSite has been designed, and, most importantly, how long your WebSite will take to load when a client tries to open your page using different modems. This final point is an important consideration with the *Net-generation*, who are less likely to wait for longer than about 15 seconds for your WebSite to load. Anecdotally, from seeing and listening to my students at Queensland University of Technology, most people will not wait unless they already know the site is worth the "long" waiting time.

There are other simple marketing examples which also translate well into the basics of Internet WebSite design. For instance, if you designed a brochure you would need to consider

- what legally can be included in the brochure (eg: copyright, liable),
- what colours are readable by those in the population that may be visually challenged, and
- ensure that the graphics you use are not a distraction to the actual message of the brochure.



The same techniques should be applied to the WebPage design process. Can you read the text over the background used? Have you ensured people who may be red/green colour blind can view the page? Have you inserted alternative text behind any images so that blind people can use software to understand what the image is about (have it "read" to them)? Are all the graphics and text you use on the WebSite copyright cleared? These principles are basic to marketing and should also be applied to WebSite design.

In brief summary, the Internet is a new medium, and the expectations are different. We have already developed discretionary customers who have time to evaluate the information they receive. The Internet is growing fast, and while no one knows it all yet, we must attempt to attract the customers interest by rapidly changing with the times, and enticing their interest to return to our WebSite. We can ignore advertisements in the street, turn off the advertisements on the television, and we can also hit the "back" button just as quickly on the Net. If you want them to stay and eventually "eat out of your hand" you will have to come up with some interesting marketing ideas to attract the customers interest. Yes - marketing ideas - not great IT ideas.

An interesting example of something different can be viewed at the *What Dreams May Come* WebSite (<http://www.whatdreamsmay.com/whatdreamshome.htm>). For example: in one of

the picture sequences at the site titled Chris's Paradise, the picture loads and segments move. You are instructed to *Click what you will. You'll understand soon enough*. If you click on the building on the hill, you will then open a new picture which is a close up of Chris' new home in paradise. By clicking on objects around this new picture you see even more; eg: a bird takes flight, sound files start, movie files start, flowers grow, paintings display and then change. This site uses the latest types of Net technology to display a site that interests the Net-generation. While designing this site using the latest technology, the designers did not ignore the fact that different browsers see it differently. Built into the site is the option to select a version that suits the end-user's browser. That's sound marketing. They have not offended a potential client!

A final suggestion for when it is time to design your WebSite: have a look at other WebSites, the good, the bad, and the downright ugly. Think about what you like about a site, and see what inspires you for your own site. Further ideas can be found from the link to *Html and JavaScript* within one of my WebPages titled: **Information Resources NetSites** (<http://www.fit.qut.edu.au/~sylvia/teaching/resources.html>).

How will you test the site and how will a potential client find it?

Having designed the WebSite, the next consideration is how someone will find this new site, and how will you test that this new marketing strategy is working.

Testing that the Site is working for you

Many ISP's provide regular monthly reports on access statistics. Certainly this is a sound indicator of how frequently potential customers see your site. Providing a feedback mechanism for potential clients also may help you here. Again, consider what has already worked for you in the past and try to translate this into the same type of testing procedures for the Internet. In particular you want to know how someone found your WebSite, and you want to test out what strategies are working for the Site, and what strategies are not. You could also simply check yourself and search on Search Engines and see how far up the list of results your WebPage is listed. Which brings us to the next consideration.

How will Clients find my WebSite?

Most business people would agree that they are under increasing pressure to provide information quickly. If we are going to be able to access the ever-increasing information resources of the Internet effectively the answer will lie in our improved searching ability. As information professionals, librarians and other Information Technology experts, have moved increasingly into the area of teaching others how to search for Internet information more effectively. I have taught sessions on searching the Internet since the early 1990's. Our abilities to search the Internet faster than the business person and retrieve a more highly relevant result are worth learning. However, not everyone bothers to learn how to search effectively.

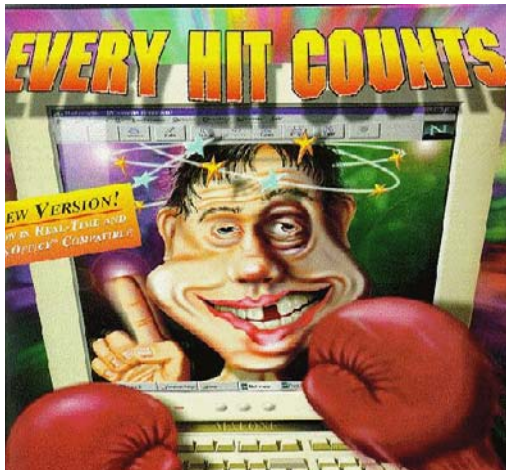
Think for a moment about you find a WebPage once its has been put on the Internet. If you are like most people, each time you access the Internet you will try to reinvent the wheel! That is, you will start a search engine like Alta Vista, HotBot, or Lycos, and start to search for the information you need.

The other alternative frequently used is the simple "*Guess the Domain Name*" of the company: eg: www.microsoft.com, or www.pepsi.com. This *Guess the Domain Name* strategy means that it is obviously important to ensure you have registered your company's Domain Name. This is a paper in itself and I will not detail this here, suffice it to say, a Domain Name must usually be derived from your registered business name.

We will concentrate instead here on how Search Engines work. In simple terms, each search engine is a database. These databases use automated tools and programs to gather resources, and each Search Engine has their own method for database organization and searching techniques. Users submit queries that "ask" the database if it contains resources on a given topic.

Let's consider these Search Engine databases briefly. Some Search Engines list only the URL (Uniform Resource Locator), or only the Title of the WebPage. Some are considered Full Text databases, that is, they claim to list every word on every page of the Internet. Some Search Engines only index the first 200 or 250 words at a site, or may produce a brief site description. Finally, there are Search Engines that also index the Meta Tags included in a WebSite. Further details on how Search Engines work, and what these "Meta Tags" are and what they provide you with from a marketing and indexing perspective can be obtained from a number of Internet sites and journal articles (Lawrence & Giles, 1999; Liu, 1999; Tyner, 1998). It is highly recommended you follow up these articles if for no other reason than to help your own searching strategy on the Internet.

Figure 5: Advertisement from Internet World magazine.



The point is, if every hit on your WebSite counts, then you must ensure that your WebSite comes towards the top of the Search Engine result list when someone searches for a resource that you, or your company, may provide.

If someone is not searching effectively, search results may include a result list of thousands, rather than 100 or less. Consider again for a moment, if you get a result of thousands - do you go beyond the first 40, or even 100, sites on the list? Probably not! So - will that potential client go beyond the first 100 to find your WebSite? ... Probably not!

It is important to remember here, that savvy Webmasters can, and do, use clever techniques to ensure their site ranks higher for retrieval on the search results list! One of the simplest ways is to register your WebSite with the Search Engines. Spend some time manually adding your WebSite URL to the databases, or pay for someone to do this for you. The other way is the use of the Meta Tags, which is another paper in itself!

Summary of Marketing Tips for Your WebSite

To summarise then, the marketing tips for your WebSite have included:

- Submit your URL to Search Engines
- Make sure your WebSite is designed to be picked up by Search Engines
- Encourage Repeat Visits
- Provide a service or resource that makes them want to visit again
- Provide a feedback mechanism for your clients
- Keep it updated!
- Get a custom Domain Name

You could also exchange links with others in area, and you should also include the URL in your company brochures, letterheads, and any other advertising. Your URL should also be included in your signature file when using email.

What next?

Having launched yourself into the Internet with a WebSite, you should endeavour to keep abreast of the Net challenges and changes of the future. They fall into three main arenas at present.

1. SECURITY:

- What will be your continued exposure to thieves and vandals;
- What protection have you put in place from Hackers that may steal, use your passwords; etc.
- The Net is not yet safe for large business transactions, but what advances are happening in the field?

2. TECHNOLOGY:

- There is (as shown) a lack of uniform standards; keep abreast of them.
- It is possible for anyone to transfer/copy your graphics, etc; what advances are happening here also?

3. LEGAL ISSUES:

- The law is usually lagging behind the latest IT developments by a few years.
- The laws governing electronic commerce are changing and should also be monitored for change: eg: are e-mail contracts and electronic signatures legal?

In Conclusion

Avoid the “me-too” syndrome; look at the market demographics before jumping into WebSite development. Design the WebSite carefully to make sure all potential clients can see it, and that it is picked up by the majority of Search Engines. Having designed the WebSite, monitor it's actually working for you! Finally, keep watching for IT and legal developments. You could also try monitoring local newspapers & Net journals, online services like *NetHappenings*, Listservs, and *What's New* sections in any site, and the media.

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